AN INVESTIGATIVE APPROACH TO DOGMATIC THEOLOGY[1]

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Since I am proposing an unconventional view, in contrast to the traditional view, I outline the philosophical background to my thinking for the benefit of the reader. Without question my view has been influenced by a modern understanding of the scientific method. I have concluded that within philosophy the modern scientific method is an ethical, if not a religious methodology since it is undertaken by humans. Modern science is the most reliable and accurate type of knowledge to date which I hold to be appropriate for theological investigation.

In this understanding dogmatic understanding cannot maintain its exclusive claim to the truth. Nor can scientific understanding satisfactorily address, without qualification, the dogmatic religious needs of humanity. In short, religious dogma and human reason need to be harmonized. Modern science is the least anthropomorphic way of humanity identifying its nature and place within the universe. Modern science identifies humanity as the highest active value in the universe whose self-reflection is the end and purpose of human knowledge thus replacing God as the traditional end of human understanding. This shift to a modern scientific focus becomes the new means by which humanity can appropriately identify itself with divinity. Modern scientific methodology can be understood as the new Gnosticism. From Leslie Dewart's perspective the scientific methodology "is best characterized as a gnosticism, since by its very nature it proclaims that the deliverance and salvation of man lie only in knowledge."[2]

This unconventional perspective presumes that metaphysics alone conceived as a dogmatic, non-empirical but rationalist philosophy, does not give reliable knowledge. Modern science gives reliable knowledge, but it is limited knowledge since it describes facts only. That is it addresses the "how" and "why" of experience, but not the possibility of any higher motivation of the human intellect. Modern science is important not merely for its own sake, but for ethical and moral consequences of social behaviour especially in light of contemporary dogmatic understanding. The Decree on the Mass Media, concerned about the "rights of art,"states.

> The controversies to which this problem increasingly gives rise frequebtly trace their origin to a false understanding of ethics and aesthetics, and the council consequently asserts that all must accept the absolute primacy of the objective order. It alone is superior to and is capable of harmonizing all forms of human activity, even the most admirable, not excepting art.[3]

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[1] All Vatican II references are taken from Flannery, etc.

[2] From the Abstract, *The Development of Karl Pearson's Scientific Philosophy*, Dewart's PhD thesis, University of Toronto (1954).

[3] *Decree on the Mass Media* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para.6, p. 541).

An investigative theological approach is, in fact, a philosophical one. With a general reading of the Documents of Vatican II it becomes clear to the veteran theologian that a modern understanding of philosophy was not a major aspect of the thinking of the Fathers of the Council, but scientific and technological thinking was. Kobler's remark is significant suggesting the shortsightedness of the Council's philosophical view. "What we are dealing with here is the modern *Journal of the Soul* for the group consciousness of the Church and not a new *summa theologica*."[4]

According to Johannes-Baptist Metz,

> Apologetics, in a general and fundamental way, is a permanent feature of all Christian theology. …. As a result of the new cultural and political situation of the Enlightenment, where Christianity and religion in general were no longer identified, and Christianity ceased to be an interest of all society as such, apologetics was developed as an independent discipline at the beginning of the 18th century.[5]

Under these conditions, apologetics[6] is free to embrace contemporary philosophy in making the Christian faith available to those whose intellectual perspective falls outside the traditional Hellenic mind-set. Traditionally the Church has viewed the sacred sciences as particularly intended for its future ministers engaged in the "intellectual apostolate."[7] Yet, according to *Gaudium et Spes* there is no mention of philosophy in the "new age of human history" as understood by the Fathers of the council.[8] There is no ready-made philosophy to be applied in apologetics. As an alternative, an "investigative theology" may be undertaken to allow the truths of revelation to be accessed by those outside the community of the faithful. The reverse is also a reality. Knowledge of dogma provides a spur, as it were, to the formation of an appropriate investigative theology to confirm the truths of philosophy. In the Western tradition "truth" has two main academic foundations. One arises from the Old Testament and the other from the incorporation of Hellenic philosophy into biblical interpretation. Kant's understanding that truth reflects an agreement with the laws of the intellect, has recast the understanding of *adaequatio rei et intellectus* in terms of a transcendental philosophy[9] making it susceptible to an investigative theology. This is a significant shift in philosophical thinking since at Vatican II the council affirmed that natural law remains in force even in the context of war.

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[4] Kobler, John (1991: viii). *Vatican II, Theophany and the Phenomenon of Man*. Peter Lang.

[5] Karl Rahner (1986:20). *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* sv "Apologetics." Burns and Oates.

[6] According to Heinrich Fries (1986: 546) "fundamental theology is the word now used for what used to be called apologetics." *Encyclopedia of Theology* sv Fundamental Theology.

[7] *Declaration on Christian Education* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 11, p. 586).

[8] *Gaudium et Spes* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 54, p. 230).

[9] Cf. Waldemar Molinski (1986: 1774). *Encyclopedia of Theology* sv Truth.

> Faced by this deplorable state of humanity the council wishes to remind people that the natural law of peoples and its universal principles still retain their binding force. The conscience of humanity firmly and ever more emphatically proclaims these principles.[10]

This suggests that the truth is not limited to objective confirmation by dogma, but by a subjective confirmation by the experiencing subject as well. The inclusion of the personal subject in dogmatic interpretation had an expanding effect on theology which is reflected in Vatican II's dialogue with the world resulting in "the theology of the transition from a culturally and intellectually restricted milieu into the situation of the world Church."[11] This, in turn, has led to a "theology of freedom," that is, an extra-ecclesial theology and the expression of personal conscience characteristic of a pluralistic civil society. A theology of freedom also meant an emancipation of philosophy to become independent of service to the Church. Could this be a reason for the omission of philosophy from the tasks of The Pontifical Mission Societies? The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity states:

> It is therefore necessary that this congregation should be both an instrument of administration and an organ of dynamic direction, that it should use scientific methods and instruments adapted to modern conditions, that it be guided by present-day research in theology, methodology and pastoral missionary work.[12]

Thus, a theology of freedom in a pluralistic society must be a philosophical theology which truly reflects the human condition in the modern world. The condition of the modern world meant that "scholasticism succeeded in laying down for the first time the scientific bases of theology … which means that it is essentially a theology, not a philosophy."[13] And here is the crux of the matter. The existential interpretation of dogmatic theology has shown that there is not a compulsory and universally constructed philosophy that supports dogmatic expression without qualification. This realization has posed a problem for ecclesial universities as the Declaration on Christian Education has noted. "Indeed, in institutions under its control the church endeavors systematically to ensure that the treatment of individual disciplines is consonant with their own principles, their own methods, and with true liberty, of scientific enquiry."[14]

To my way of thinking there is a problem with the understanding of the role of philosophy in the documents of Vatican II. The consideration of philosophy is reserved to the training of priests. *Optatam Totius* subordinates philosophy to theology. The following paragraph is in Section V of the document "The Revision of Ecclesiastical Studies."

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[10] *Gaudium et Spes* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 79, p. 265).
[11] Karl Rahner (1986:365). *Encyclopedia of Theology* sv Dogma.
[12] *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 29, p. 485).
[13] Eberhard Simons (1986: 1542). *Encyclopedia of Theology* sv Scholasticism.
[14] *Declaration on Christian Education* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 10, p. 585).

> Philosophical subjects should be taught in such a way that students are first of all gradually led to a solid and coherent knowledge of [1] human nature, [2] the world and [3] God, guided by the philosophical tradition of lasting value. At the same time they should take account of modern philosophical developments, particularly those of influence in their own country, as well as recent progress in the sciences, so that with a proper understanding of the present age, they will be equipped for dialogue with the people of their time.[15]

But what are we to make of the study of philosophy outside ecclesiastical studies? *Gaudium et Spes* notes:

> Furthermore, when we work in the disciplines of philosophy, history, mathematics and science and when we cultivate the arts, we can greatly help humanity to reach a higher understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty to make judgments of universal value.[16]

Outside the ecclesiastical corporation, philosophy shares the spotlight with other contemporary disciplines. But there is a negative connotation.

> There is no doubt that modern scientific and technical progress can lead to a certain phenomenism or agnosticism; this happens when scientific methods of investigation, which of themselves are incapable of penetrating to the deepest nature of things, are unjustifiably taken as the supreme norm for arriving at truth.[17]

Set between these two perspectives, philosophy has not been truly liberated from ecclesiastical control. But the new aspect of culture has been introduced which includes the philosophical aspect as embedded in various cultures.

> The word 'culture' in the general sense refers to all those things which go to the refining and developing of humanity's diverse mental and physical endowments. We strive to subdue the earth by our knowledge and labor; we humanize social life both in the family and in the whole civic community through the improvement of customs and institutions; … in this sense one can speak about a plurality of cultures.[18]

Within culture philosophy receives its liberation from ecclesiastical control and is free to contemplate a larger and more comprehensive notion of humanity that previously was realized within a traditional religious interpretation. That religion has been the cause of many wars is

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[15] *Decree on the Training of Priests* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 15, p. 375).
[16] *Gaudium et Spes* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 57, p. 232).
[17] *Gaudium et Spes* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 57, p. 232).
[18] *Gaudium et Spes* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 53, p. 229).

not denied in the Council documents. Inspired by John 14:27, the Council recognized that religious peace is more than the absence of war.

> Peace is more than the absence of war; it cannot be reduced to the maintenance of a balance of power between opposing forces nor does it arise out of despotic dominion, but it is appropriately called "the effect of righteousness" (Is 32:17).[19]

But the same Council understands the "effect of righteousness" can only be achieved by evaluating the effect of new scientific and philosophical discoveries, a task the church assigns to theologians. But I suggest, in the light of *laïcité* philosophers have the same responsibility.

[19] *Gaudium et Spes* (Flannery, *Vatican Council II*. Para. 77, p. 263).